MAR 27 1966



Secret negotiations are under way between the United States and the Vietcong for the release of a captive American government official, Gustav C. Hertz.

The negotiations, which have now reached a critical stage, have been conducted for months through a variety of channels. If an agreement is reached, it will end a 14-month ordeal for Hertz, a nigh-ranking Agency for International Development official from Leesburg, Va., and will climax one of the most fascinating and convoluted undercover negotiations of modern diplomacy.

The desperate, quiet effort to free him has involved since last summer the personal intervention of a U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy), a fruitless ransom effort by the Central Intelligence Agency, he political fortunes of a North African nationalist leader, the intercession of private critics of American policy in Vietam, and the stability of the Saigon gov-

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Approved For Release 2000/08/03: CIA-RDP75-00001R000300260046-7

Always in the background, with the highest stakes in the stor met secretly with Algerian who had never met - Hertz who, promised to personally change for his release, a Vict. dent Ben Bella. cong terrorist named Nguyen Ben Bella Overthrown Van Hai, who was arrested in Saigon in March, 1965, for participation in the bombing the late President Kennedy, of the American Embassy.

gon. He left behind a gentle June 19. and deeply religious wife, and back home in the United States.

Hertz never returned from that ride and two months were to pass before the Vietcong confirmed what was widely believed. He had become, as a captive, a civilian Bella had left off. pawn in a curious war. His life hung in the balance of events he could not control.

On April 7, the National arm of the Vietcong, broad- mained in custody in Saigon. cast a communique from Hanoi announcing that Hertz was in custody and would be executed if the terrorist Hail were put to death by the government of South Vietnam.

Two days later, Hai was sentenced to death but that sentence was not to be carried out. The South Victnamese spared his life.

By that time, the Hertz family had returned to its home in Leesburg where Mrs. Hertz shunned all publicity and all comment except for one request: "Please be prayerful." Nearby was the family of her brother-in-law, A. Burke Hertz, an Alexandria lawyer.

Weeks passed with no sign that his captor intended to let him go.

Kennedy's Help Sought

At this point Sen. Kennedy was approached by representatives of the Hertz family. They thought he might, in some way, be able to help.

On the advice of friends, Kennedy decided that an apthe Victoong proach to through Algerian government officials might be fruitful. The NLF had representatives in Algiers who were in regular con-tact with the Algerian government.

Kennedy broached the idea o the White House where the

Shortly thereafter the Sena-feet the political stability of affair, were two helpless men Ambassador Cherif Guelal,

Ben Bella, an admirer of of this alternative.

For the next several weeks, there was uncertainty as to portedly \$20,000-was turned five children, one of whom was whether the new government over to go-betweens in Saigon, of President Houari Boumedi- but Hertz was not released. enne would be willing to con-Hertz. Early in August, Amransom offer was fraudulent. bassador Guelal brought the The second was that at the last matter to Boumedienne's atminute the Vietcong turned eral new proposals were contention and the President down the offer. What hap-

> couraging. The Algerians re-ported that the Victorian were that at least been recovered. willing to exchange Hertz for forts was discouraging. How-

High-Level Discussion

This proposal was taken to In September, it was sugbassador to South Vietnam who was serving as a consultant to the President, reportedly opposed an exchange on the terms being discussed in Algiers.

Although Gottlieb for a political action director of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), might be in a position to make contact with the NLF representatives in Algiers. giers.

could make no valid exchange able response. He was inoffer. It was further argued formed, it is reported, that the is alive and well. ist at U.S. insistence might af-

the Saigon regime.

An alternative plan was proand the man offered in ex- take up the matter with Presi- posed, involving a broader exchange of perhaps a dozen prisoners on each side, including Hertz. But nothing came

The next development had was receptive to playing the the flavor of a spy novel. From The story began early on role of intermediary and sources in Saigon came word Feb. 2 of last year. Hertz, a raised the subject with the that it might be possible to sepopular AID administrator NLF representatives. But be cure Hertz' release through a with a fondness for practical fore serious negotiations could ransom arrangement. And unjokes, went cycling one after begin, Ben Bella was over der the direction of the CIA, noon in the suburbs of Sai- thrown in a military coup on a ransom attempt was actually made.

A large sum of money-re-

Two explanations have been tinue the effort on behalf of offered. The first was that the agreed to take up where Ben pened to the money is still un-The initial results were en- it that at least part of it has certain, although reports have ing a private approach to the

Liberation Front, the political the terrorist Hai who re ever, the undertaking was not possible. abandoned.

SANE Official's Role

the highest councils of the gested that Sanford Gottlieb the secret negotiations now American Government. Gen. gested that Sanford Gottlieb the secret Maxwell Taylor, a former Am- of Bethesda, political action under way.

Although Gottlieb has de-It was argued that the clined to confirm any part United States had no control in the Hertz affair, it is unover prisoners of the Saignor derstood that he communication over prisoners of the Saigon ed by letter with contacts in government and, therefore, Algiers and received a favorVicteong were again willing! to exchange Hertz for the terrorist Hai, that they had so informed the South Victnamese, but had received no reply.

Shortly thereafter, a new communication arrived through private channels from Algiers to the effect that the Hertz-Hai exchange could be made if it were done "in a certain way." This was interpreted to mean that Sen. Kennedy was to have a personal role in the release, and that possibly he was expected to go to Algiers to accept custody of Hertz.

But, again, nothing came of

New Approaches Tried

All through the winter, representatives of the Hertz family here remained in contact with U.S. officials. Sevproaches were tried, includ-South Vietnamese Embassy here. The South Vietnamese responded, it is said, with an offer to cooperate in any way

What subsequently occurred was a renewal of the original offer-Hertz for Hai-and it is this offer that is the basis of

Will they bear fruit? From the best information available, no inkling of the Vietcong attitude has recently been received, and on the basis of past failures and frustration: there is no undue optimism here. There is hope, however, that an early response will be received.

Hertz has not been seen for months but the assumption is